LEN LYE AND LAURA RIDING IN THE 1930s: THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FILM AND LITERATURE

THIS ESSAY CONCERNS ITSELF with one episode in the intersection of film and writing in modernism: the brief collaboration of the experimental film-maker Len Lye and the poet Laura Riding in the early 1930s. It was a collaboration which saw Riding and Graves publish some of Lye's writings, use his illustrations for book covers for their Seizen Press, and Riding and Lye produce a film script and a joint film manifesto, as well as other related writings. In part I simply want to restore Lye to the picture, since his trajectory is a fascinating one, emblematic of a second-wave British modernism characterised by its dialogue with Surrealism, its satirical stance, its collaborative work, and by such fluid movements between genres and media as we see in Lye (and in other figures such as his friend Oswell Blakestone, film-maker, artist, novelist, poet, editor, travel-writer). In terms of the concerns of this Special Issue, I want to look at a form of cinema which sees itself as inscription, and a form of writing which seems to partially conceive itself in terms of cinematic technology. Ultimately, what will be described is, paradoxically, both collaboration between poet and film-maker and a mutual rejection of the intersection of literature and film.

Some biography is probably necessary.[1] Born in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1901, Lye was from a fairly poor family, and for a while they lived in a remote lighthouse. A rather solitary modernist in the antipodes – he later described his excitement at finding Pound's *Gaudier* in Wellington around 1920 – he worked in Australia and spent time in Samoa studying tribal art before his arrival in the UK in 1926. He stayed here almost two decades, painting as a member of the "Seven and Five Society", the group around Ben Nicholson, and making some famous films for Grierson's GPO film unit, before departing for the USA in 1944.[2] He made more films, but for much of his later career worked as a kinetic sculptor. He died in New York in 1980.

Like Riding in her "Histories", Lye produced much of his work in the 1930s in dialogue with Surrealism – he admired Miró, and wrote prose pieces in an "automatic" style indebted to Breton and Stein. A collection of these was published by Graves and Riding as one of the first Seizen Press books, *No Trouble*, in 1930. He exhibited paintings at the London Surrealist exhibitions of 1936 and 1937, and practised automatic doodling, a technique, Wystan Curnow and Roger Horrocks report, which was "increasingly important for him as a source of images and 'energy signs', and as a method of transferring power from the 'new' brain to the old" (*FM* xiii). Lye preferred the term "old brain" to the "unconscious", partly

because of his interest in "primitive" (Aboriginal, Samoan and Maori) art, and partly because his evolving theories of motion – which after the war took on a more biological and evolutionary slant – involved notions of empathetic registration in which the artist takes the motion he or she sees in the world and translates it into a form dependent on their individual body and its accidentals. He later commented that "I got my feeling for motion down to the most subtle of empathies, such as the way both ends of a pen waggled in relation to one another as I write, or how my eyeballs moved in their sockets as I scanned lines of print" (*FM* 82). The art of movement is, then, founded on notions of encounter and translation, rather than mechanical registration.

Lye had begun with scratching on film when he was working as a scenario writer in Australia in the early 1920s, noticing the random scratches in film leaders and making his own experiments. He revived the idea in London in 1934, using film stock which friends gave him, producing "direct" films set to music: *Colour Box* (1935), *Kaleidoscope* (1935), *Rainbow Dance* (1936) and others, films which combine animation techniques and colour patterns – lines, grids, dancing blobs – directly applied as a lacquer, sometimes to already used documentary footage, with Post Office advertising slogans added at the end. The films were popular for their startling colour; and for the playful yoking of rhythmic image and jazz music achieved by the sound editing of Lye's Australian collaborator, Jack Ellit. They have inspired many later animators; even Disney purchased and studied them for the opening of *Fantasia*. In his post-war films, without the funding he needed, Lye returned to the solitary technique of scratching onto films, producing dancing, twisting lines set to African drums. All Lye's "direct" films have a remarkable vibration intensity: the vibration produced by the fact that directly-painted lines and colours can never achieve the precise registration of a photographed object or of cartoons laid in a frame. For Lye, this jumpiness was a desirable effect; as we will see, an intimation of life.

What does it mean to scratch or paint directly onto film? For Lye the "direct film" means a return to the origins of film in the play of light of the magic lantern, and to a version of the pre-Griffith "cinema of attractions", the cinema which astounds technically. But direct film is more radical than that. Bypassing the origins of film in photography and the observation of actual movement – in Marey and Muybridge – direct film can work without a camera, using the projector as its medium, and producing an art of *pure* movement, abstract and animated. If one were to succumb to a Foucaultian moment, it might be said that this marks a radical epistemic shift: movement, *perhaps for the first time in the history of representation*, free of the direct trace of the human hand at the level of production (which remains present, of course, in abstract painting) or of realism at the level of representation. To be sure, a few other artists

experimented with "direct" film in this period, though surely Lye is the most accomplished. But Lye's "direct film" is, to return to the point, often free from the figure moving in the spectator's vision, as in the theatre or naturalistic film, or from what remains at least a displaced representation of bodies in motion in most animated film – Lye said that he thought Mickey Mouse was just the Griffith continuity rules applied to animation. The individual frame may be produced by hand-painting, but what the spectator sees is not; it is produced instead by successive frames moving through a projector's gate, that is a series of quanta integrated in the physiology of perception. This foregrounds the technology of presentation rather than registration, as Lye himself acknowledges when he stencils film-sprocket motifs onto his film; or when he breaks down three-colour processes and applies their components abstractly to a ground of black and white film. But Lye does more than that: he uses the projector as a colour mixer, noting that "a few frames of blue followed by a few frames of yellow appears as a vivid green" (*FM* 44). Indeed, in its constant re-codification of colour values and its break between the production of visual information and its reception, Lye's work looks forward to digitalisation, as at least one recent manifesto of digital film acknowledges; that is why *we* look at it with such easy recognition.

In a recent article on Lye, Paul Watson argues that Lye's work deconstructs the distinction between so-called "live" film and animation, and in fact exposes the way cinema constructs motion: "it is only through the dual logic of animation – to endow with life and impart motion to – that cinema can define itself as cinema." There is, he argues, "nothing less live about animation than live action; both create an illusion of life through what is first and foremost an animation apparatus."[3] This is undoubtedly true; but what if we take Watson's argument a stage further, and accept Lye's own claims that what his animation offers us is less an "illusion" than a form of life, mediated by the "empathy" that allows the artist to translate external motion or sub-cellular events into film. One might want to say that it is, in some Deleuzian sense, a new mode of *being* – it isn't surprising that Lye later described his early work *Tusalava* in terms of viral life. Compare Lewis Mumford, writing in the 1930s: "Without any conscious notion of its destination, the motion picture presents us with a world of interpenetrating, counter-influencing organisms: and it enables us to think about that world with a greater degree of concreteness."[4] Film as an organism, animated and moving in time to music: for Lye, the beat of life is a techno beat.

Finally, "Animation" in the abstract sense is an interesting subject in early cinema, and is worth a more extended aside here. Early film criticism repeatedly describes film as revealing the "life of things", that is as fetishistically endowing the inanimate objects with life. Such terms recall the nineteenth-century anthropological debates on two broadly opposed ways of explaining similar phenomena in "primitive" societies: animism and

fetishism.[5] Broadly speaking, animism (associated with the British anthropologist E. B. Tylor) represents the worship of totemic objects as an intimation of the soul, the kernel of all later vitalisms and idealisms. For Auguste Comte and Karl Marx, on the other hand, the fetish represents a way of thinking about materiality and its relation to the human – for Marx commodity fetishism represents the alienation of value from its sources, as well as the source of social desire itself; implicitly, the troubling intersection of an idealist category (ideology) and the real. If Marx's definition of fetishism as "the religion of sensuous desire" seems to offer a general reflection on cinema as an institution – what does cinema do if not present an abstract, alienated investment in the glittering world of the *mise en scene*? – then Lye's animation refuses such pleasures as they might be invested in the object, focusing on the process itself; the vibrating images of the hand-painted film bypass the object in favour of that which animates. "Animism" in Lye's filmic anthropology might thus represent a vitalism conceived as intrinsic to the medium, a kind of film which cannot be the vehicle of illusion, and so cannot be demystified (in this he differs from the Surrealists, for whom filmic fetishism is, broadly speaking, to be put to subversive uses). Animism vs. fetishism, animation vs. representation; these are the oppositions which define Lye's direct films, which demand the sensuousness of the "real", and ultimately life itself, at the level of presentation rather than representation.

How does all this relate to Riding and her collaboration with Lye? First, a brief sketch of that collaboration: Lye, singly and then with his wife Anne, was one of the inner members of the Riding–Graves circle in the 1930s. His collaboration with Riding produced a plan for a film, *Quicksilver*, in 1933: Riding wrote the script and John Aldridge did colour sketches, and although the film was never made, it seems related to the Aldridge–Riding collaboration "The Life of the Dead".[6] The piece which Lye and Riding wrote together, the manifesto (if we can call it that) "Film-making", appeared in 1935 in the first volume of *Epilogue*, the occasional journal which Riding and Graves published. She then, reportedly, published a 46-page pamphlet, *Len Lye and the Problem of Popular Films* (1938): a pamphlet, if it exists, which is so rare that even her bibliographer could not locate a copy.[7]

One answer to the question above is that Lye's stress on directness of communication matches Riding's own. Lye was willing to apply his ideas to literature. He attempted to translate poetry into "direct film" in a 7-minute film called *Full Fathom Five* (1937), with Gielgud reading passages from Shakespeare. In a 1936 article he suggested voice-and-colour films or television, with "colours rising up off the pages of a book to fill the screen as a person reads from it […]. This fresh acceptance would isolate the words from their recording in abstract type and present them as 'immediate' mental stimuli" (*FM* 44). This proposal seems to find an echo in

Riding's stress on the immediacy of poetry, and, in "Come, Words, Away", her desire to remove language from the accidentals of its presentation:

> Come, words, away to where
> The meaning is not thickened
> With the voice's fretting substance,
> Nor look of words is curious
> As letters in books staring out. (*P* 134)

The "Film-making" manifesto begins with an attack on all thinking which stresses form as an achieved reality rather that the context-bound movement which creates form. This error creates the tendency to read "truth-signs where there are only life-signs"; movement is the "language of life", and movement is "the earliest language". Movement is Being, "physical things"; the world of the senses rather than meaning. They continue:

> But the arbitrary realities of life do not explain themselves. We cannot expect them to tell what they are as against other things which are. We can only expect a physical accuracy of them, physical explicitness – movement. And this is why a strict historical analysis of life is necessarily cinematographic. It is not what is called "history": because it is the object of professional history to find truth in life, and this is neither physically appropriate nor possible. History imposes on life a kind of accuracy of which it is innocent, an accuracy of self-explanation; whereas life has only physical accuracy. (*FM* 39)

With their stress on the movement and origins of life as opposed to analytic frameworks, these formulae recall Bergson; the difference is, of course, that for Bergson the "cinematographic" is the enemy, the analysis which cuts the flow of being into segments – since Bergson of course thinks of film in terms of the work of his famous colleague at the Collège de France, E. J. Marey.[8] This alerts us to the *recuperative* position of film here. Echoing the Surrealist stress on film as defamiliarisation, as a re-seeing of the world, the manifesto aims to return movement to the eye, to prise it away from language: "To extricate movement from the static finalities or shapes which the mind imposes on living experience is *to translate the memory of time back into time again* – to relive experience instead of merely remembering it" (*FM* 41, emphasis added). In some ways this is akin to Riding's translation procedure in *The Life of the Dead* (1933), the poetic sequence which she wrote first in French, she explained, because that language is more literal and anti-poetic.[9]

That evocative formula, "to translate the memory of time back into time again," touches on the debate which threads its way through turn-of-the-century psychology, psychophysics and philosophy, on the issue of the *lost present*; the moment which for James and Bergson is spread across an echoing continuum; which for Helmholtz is lost in reaction-time and processing; which for Husserl is a kind of retrospective fiction. The present is ineffable, cannot be captured; but film offers at least the possibility of

re-presenting it.[10] For the Surrealists, the recaptured moment is most often a sublime flash or shock which ruptures the continuity of habitual perception; for Lye, the moment is realised by its translation into what he called "figures of motion", that is by the empathetic and non-mimetic reproduction of the energies of the world in the art-work (and it is interesting in this respect that he was willing to re-edit actual motion, like the man's swinging arm in *Trade Tattoo*, to fit the music). Lye admits the problem of "strict accuracy": life cannot be relived *as representation*, but it can be imitated.

Time, and the reclamation of time, is a preoccupation for the later Riding: poetry, as her 1938 preface explained, arguing for a state in which "we are so continuously habituated that there is no temporal interruption between one poetic incident (poem) and another" (*P* 413). Time and history are almost always linked to "the curse of thought's construction"; it is the self-conscious "historical effort" that blights poetry.[11] The former phrase is from her poem "March, 1937", which describes the way "vision [is] now a thing of thinking", in a world of mediated or fictionalised time. Riding's poem turns us away from this time of "story", contained within the "envelopes" of years, months, days:

> The poem takes the story away.
> We have left nor a month nor its least cruel day.
> Nor the envelope without the envelope
> Without the envelope within.
> This is the poem.
> Are we so naked then of life,
> Stripped to the death?
> Is this the promised core of us?
> Come closer, let us not shudder so, shiver,
> We are not ill, nor dead – nor uncovered
> In the lost shame of ordeal.
> There is something so good in this
> That, despite worry, hope, and no letter,
> I scarcely dare let myself wish for better. (*P* 312)

What is arrived at is the *moment*, a moment of encounter (an empathetic moment in Lye's terms) and of a new representation, the poem. As she later wrote, "I put religious trust in the predictiveness of poetry as an immediacy, not a future in the making" (*P* 3). For Riding, this moment is typically that of love, containing a "promise of the words all yearned to hear from one another" (*P* 3). In "Friendship on Visit" she writes, "Yet must the picture be a talk-lit darkness,/Of flickering instances, for so it was," evoking cinema's flashing instances in the birth of passion.

We can also turn to Riding's "Poet: A Lying Word", with all its many resonances: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Plato's allegory of the cave, among others. The distinction here is between the false wall, the poet who is like

a ladder or a monument to be scaled, and the true wall, which is the poet only visible as her poem. Thus:

> And the tale is no more of the going: no more a poet's tale of a going false-like to a seeing. The tale is of a seeing true-like to a knowing: there's but to stare the wall through now, well through. (*P* 216)

Can we think of this wall which we must stare through as akin to the film itself for Lye? – the film which is not a going to a seeing (by the camera and director), but rather something more unmediated, seeing and knowing in closer relation, seeking nothing beyond the liveliness of the representation. What is produced is something precisely located in time, "a written edge of time" – the end-of-time which Riding equates with the production of meaning; not the metaphorical weather of the poetic career but the presence of the body as it moves through time:

> It is not a wall, it is not a poet. It is not a lying wall, it is not a lying word. It is a written edge of time. Step not across, for then into my mouth, my eyes, you fall. Come close, stare me well through, speak as you see. But, oh, infatuated drove of lives, step not across now. Into my mouth, my eyes, shall you thus fall, and be yourselves no more.
>
> Into my mouth, my eyes, I say, I say. I am no poet like transitory wall to lead you into such slow terrain of time as measured out your single span of broken turns of season once and one again. I lead you not. You have now come with me, I have now come with you, to your last turn and season: thus could I come with you, thus only.
>
> […]
>
> This body-self, this wall, this poet-like address, is that last barrier long shied of in your elliptic changes: out of your leaping, shying, season-quibbling, have I made it, is it made. And if now poet-like it rings with one-more-time as if, this is the mounted stupor of your everlong outbiding worn prompt and lyric, poet-like – the forbidden one-more-time worn time-like.

The poem as a site of encounter with *time worn time-like* – recalling that earlier phrase, "to translate the memory of time back into time again". *Time worn time-like* is time returned to the poem itself, the time of "have I made it, is it made".

One further example might be adduced, Riding's "How Now We Talk", with its stress on directness and precision pointing towards her later position on language. Here it is in the moment of encounter, a moment of "physical accuracy" (as film is described above), perhaps even a form of poetry written as what we could call the cinematographic mode of history, without past or future:

> For what we now talk of is all true
> Or all false, since all is words, no doing to do
> Or prospect to wage or more going to go
> Or grief to be old or delight to be new.

We must keep faith now with what we say
And every coxcomb ghost of fancy lay,
Forbearing from the tales which cloy
The ears of time and drive the future away. (*P* 283)

In this state "only the present is left to promise/And for air the breath of our words must suffice" – language taking on a physical immediacy.

A final question: what might all this have to do with Riding's famous abandonment of poetry at the end of the 1930s? Film, or rather Lye's version of film, may have supported her evolving belief – really a suspicion – that poetic language is embodied, immanent; it may have helped her escape from what Jerome McGann calls the "Kantian ghetto" of poetry, into a poetry in which the presence of language is attested.[12] Riding's view of film can be allied to a poetry of being; of the moment's edge represented by the encounter of self and other. This is in turn related to her later belief that poetry is the product of an instantaneous apperception, and the related belief that only the "instant" understanding of a poem is acceptable – that the poem must be released from meaning into being.[13]

But film, for that reason, helps Riding to separate meaning from poetry, and to see the redundancy of the poem. One corollary of the stance of "Film as Motion" is that the cinema produces only a caricature of language if it tries to be literary or historical in the discursive sense:

> The language of cinema is movement. When it attempts to make of movement a literary language the result is a physical-intellectual caricature-language which furnishes stories of life as something half-true, half-ridiculous (the result of such films as *Henry VIII*, *Catherine the Great*, *Christina of Sweden*). The language of the film, that is, becomes the language of hysteria; people have been trained to go to the cinema to enjoy respectable hysteria, not to know, physically and soberly, "life". And so they enjoy films more than proper stage drama because the excitement of feeling unreasonably and irresponsibly in contact with "meanings" is on a larger scale than with stage drama […]. (*FM* 40)

The "language of hysteria" is the mixing of the somatic and linguistic; "sentimentalities". This shares its structure with Riding's post-war position on poetry – seeing it as a hopelessly mixed discourse, confusing truth with the merely pleasurable image, sound-effect or play of connotation – as, in effect, a product of *techne*. If film is the language of being, and rational prose the language of truth or meaning, then there is no room for poetry in its mixing of these elements; poetry too becomes "hysterical".

This has been a story of modernist refusal of what André Bazin called a "mixed cinema", a cinema in which the values of literature and film mix.[14] For Lye, the "literary" in the sense of discursive meaning and narration is not a part of his cinema, eschewed for a technology of sensation and being. For Riding, poetry may aim to be part of being and even, for a moment, find a kind of ally in film – an ally against "history". But

ultimately she equates poetry with a disabling mechanics of pleasure, with the fall into the body. A coda (and a final irony). Riding's career after her return to America and marriage to Schuyler Jackson was dedicated in large part to a project for a philosophy and dictionary of rationalised concepts – an idea still in process at her death, and subsequently edited by William Harmon and issued with an introduction by Charles Bernstein as *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* (1997). As if in parallel, when Lye arrived in the USA in 1945 he came to make a series of six 10-minute black and white films entitled *Basic English*, sponsored by "The March of Time" and supervised, of course, by I. A. Richards.[15] It seems that if the modernist dream of unmediated communication of being or meaning, mind to mind, cannot be achieved in poetry or film, one might settle for mere accuracy. That, tragically some would say, is what Riding spent so many decades doing in that lonely house in Florida, up to her death in 1991. And one wonders if she ever went to the movies.

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NOTES

[1] The best source of general material on Lye, as well as of his own writings, is Len Lye, *Figures of Motion: Selected Writings*, ed. and intro. W. Curnow & R. Horrocks (Auckland, 1984), subsequently referred to in the text as *FM*. This text includes a comprehensive bibliography and filmography. Lye's films are currently available in two video collections, *Animation*, in the GPO Classic Collection (issued by the BFI), and *Free Radicals*, a compilation issued by the Len Lye Foundation.

[2] An excellent recent treatment of Lye's London context is M. Remy, *Surrealism in Britain* (Aldershot, 1999). His films are described briefly in the standard accounts of British film of the 1930s by Rachael Low and others, and in most histories of film animation. The collaboration with Riding is, however, barely mentioned in D. Baker's *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (New York, 1993) and in other accounts of Riding.

[3] P. Watson, "True Lyes: (Re)Animating Film Studies", *Art & Design* 53 (1997), 46–9.

[4] L. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (London, 1946), p. 343.

[5] For historical and theoretical accounts of these ideas, see, respectively, G. W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987), pp. 192ff., and W. Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx", in: *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. E. Apter & W. Pietz (Ithaca, 1993), pp. 119–51.

[6] *Quicksilver* was described by Oswell Blakeston, with a call for funds to make the film, in *Close Up*, 10/2 (1933), 199. As well as the collaborative texts listed, a statement by Lye was included in Riding's *The World and Ourselves* [*Epilogue* 4] (London, 1938).

[7] J. P. Wexler, *Laura Riding: A Bibliography* (New York, 1981), p. xxi. Wexler's reference is based on a list of publications drawn up by Riding in collaboration with Alan Clarke; however, the pamphlet is also listed by Curnow & Horrocks, *FM* 148, as *Len Lye and the Problem of Popular Film*.

[8] Riding in fact attacks Bergson (or at least Bergson in her own rather peculiar understanding of his work as representing a philosophy of the "Zeitgeist") in *Contemporaries and Snobs* (London, 1928), 145, 184.

[9] *The Poems of Laura Riding* (1938; Manchester, 1980), p. 360. Subsequently cited in the text as *P.*

[10] Recent discussions of this issue include M. A. Doane, "Temporality, Storage, Legibility: Freud, Marey and the Cinema", *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996), 313–43; L. Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity and Drift* (Durham, NC, 1998), pp. 15–25. Doane's position is ultimately more pessimistic than Chaney's: cinema also operates under the sign of loss, since its intervals can never recapture time's flow.

[11] L. Riding & R. Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London, 1927), p. 259.

[12] See J. McGann, "Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Literal Truth", *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992), 454–73.

[13] See P. S. Termes, "Codes of Silence: Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Refusal to Speak", *PMLA* 109 (1994), 87–99.

[14] A. Bazin, "In Defense of Mixed Cinema", in: *What is Cinema?*, selected and edited by H. Gray (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 53–75.

[15] The series is described (without mention of Lye) in J. Russo's *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (London, 1989), pp. 435–7, as is Richard's negative response to the Riding–Jackson linguistic project.